Colin Escott, with George Merritt and William MacEwen. *Hank Williams: The Biography*. Little, Brown and Company, 1994. 307 pages

Colin Escott's *Hank Williams: The Biography*, written with the assistance of George Merritt and William MacEwen, was eagerly awaited by many scholars who are now turning their attention to the rich source of research country music is turning out to be. Any music that portrays itself as the voice of the common folk cannot be ignored by cultural historians, nor can a figure like Hank Williams. He was able to present himself as the plainest of folks, writing about life's common heartbreaks. Yet at the same time, he had an unerring sense of the wider comrnercial appeal of what had, until the 1950's, been termed 'hillbilly music,' and it was with a number of Williams' songs that country music crossed onto the pop charts There have been a number of biographies of Williams, yet they have all been both informative and disappointing. His life has a way of devolving, when rendered, into cliches of genius and drunkenness, and producing, in the end, a portrait that might fit well onto a tabloid talk show.

Colin Escott's excellent liner notes to the CD box set *Hank Williams: The Singles Collection,* and his effective portrayal of Sun records in *Cood Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock & Roll,* raised hopes that Hank Williams had finally found a biographer equal to the task And Escott's work is the most moving and effective account of Williams' life. Through rare photos of a bespectacled Hank singing on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama in the 1930's, to the clear, and sometimes painful, reminiscences of those closest to him, Williams is a more approachable figure than in previous accounts of his life.

At the center of this book is the tumultuous years Hank and Audrey Williams were married. There are plenty of horrid scenes between this couple that could neither live together nor apart, and the legacy of this relationship remains in what became country standards, from "Your Cheatin' Heart" to "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." There are also, to be sure, gentler times and even a recurring comic scenario; Audrey was determined, despite an inability to carry a tune, to launch her own singing career, and Hank would record duets with her to the growing irritation of his back-up musicians. (When it is sometimes said that country music singers have no talent, just listen to someone who truly cannot sing.) In their own way, Hank and Audrey were the John and Yoko of country music.

Yet for all the effective recounting of recording dates and song lyrics, it still remains a mystery—or, at least, an improbability—that the figure that we see throughout the book repeatedly drinking himself into oblivion and turning on those closest to him could have had the heart, let alone the time, to create a body of work unequaled in the history of country music. Escott states at the

opening of the book that to ignore Williams' failings would be "like writing about The Titanic without mentioning the iceberg." Yet his focus on these matters takes the book perilously close to a new genre of biography which Joyce Carol Oates has termed pathobiography; biographers, with an increasing license to write about "warts and all," are frequently finding their subjects overwhelmed by these failings.

The reader, after finishing this book, could listen the final set of songs on *Hank Williams: The Complete Singles.* Williams' chilling vocals, accompanied only by his guitar in demo recordings, raises a number of further questions about the way Hank Williams changed—and 'countrified'—his music from inception to finished product, and whether he wanted to, or felt he had to, continually add fiddles and steel guitars and even 'twang up' his vocals. (Country musicians had long acted out the preconceptions of recording industry executives in order to gain a foothold in the business—the acceptance of the label 'hillbilly' from the 1920's to the 1950's is testament to that.)

Hearing Williams sing these last songs make him seem not only ready for the emergence of rock & roll in the 1950's, but also the folk music boom of the 1960's. The collection ends with Williams singing "The Log Train," a loving account of a doting father who dies at an early age. In truth, Williams' father was a distant figure who lived longer than his son. Yet this idealization of an imaginary past would perhaps be Hank Williams strongest legacy, a conviction that forged not only his bond with country music but also American culture.

Brooks Ammerman Iowa University, Iowa